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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 000180

SIPDIS

NEA/ARP

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/14/2018
TAGS: PGOV PREL MARR MOPS KU
SUBJECT: DEPLETED URANIUM DETECTION AT RANGE PROMPTS
CONVOKING OF AMBASSADOR

Classified By: Political Counselor Pete O'Donohue for reasons 1.4 b and d

Summary

¶1. (C) Kuwaiti MinDef Shaykh Jaber Al Sabah convoked Ambassador on March 1 to express his concern over a February 21 radiological survey that detected uranium oxide at a firing range shared by USG and GOK military forces. While clearly uncomfortable raising the issue, the MinDef acknowledged his concern that adverse public reaction in the event of a press leak could affect US-GOK bilateral relations. He expressed surprise when informed that US forces had ceased all use of depleted uranium rounds in Kuwait in 2003 (prior to cleanup operations undertaken by US decontamination teams during the period September-November 2003). MinDef, after being assured by Ambassador that the matter would be appropriately addressed, said he would authorize the reinstatement of live fire training that had been halted February 24 by Kuwaiti Chief of Staff LTG Fahed Al-Amir in a knee-jerk response to the survey's findings.
End Summary.

Depleted Uranium Found at Firing Range

¶2. (C) Kuwait's First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense (MinDef) Shaykh Jaber Mubarak Al-Hamad Al Sabah convoked Ambassador on March 1 to discuss the results of 21 February radiological survey that detected the presence of uranium oxide at Range 8 in the Udairi Range Complex -- a firing range shared by USG and GOK military forces. The survey, conducted by the Kuwait Armed Forces Weapons of Mass Destruction Directorate (KAFWMDD), found radiation at levels significantly higher than the maximum level considered acceptable under prevailing safety standards. These findings were confirmed as "above the norm" in a subsequent survey by an US Army Central (ARCENT) radiological team.

Suspicions Run Rampant

¶3. (C) In delivering his "harsh message" to Ambassador, MinDef asked, through an interpreter, why the US, "a close friend and ally," still used depleted uranium (DU) rounds in Kuwait. In response, Ambassador explained to him that US forces had not used DU rounds for training since 2003 and that the USG had contracted MKM Engineers, Inc. to remove some 11,000 pounds of contaminated material in cleanup operations conducted September-November 2003. The MinDef, while lauding the overall bilateral military relationship, and repeatedly expressing gratitude for the "protection" of Kuwait provided by US forces, told Ambassador that he feared that the eventual public reaction to this contamination would tarnish the US military's image in the country.

Training Cease-fire

¶4. (C) On February 24, upon learning of the results of the survey, Kuwait Armed Forces Chief of Staff LTG Fahed Al-Amir, canceled all US live fire (and blank ammunition) training conducted within the Udairi Range Complex. In Ambassador's March 1 meeting with MinDef, Ambassador explained that such measures jeopardized unit readiness of troops preparing for deployment to Iraq and bore no relation to the DU issue at hand, as DU was not utilized in these exercises. She strongly and repeatedly urged that live fire exercises be allowed to recommence. The MinDef eventually complied and said he would authorize the order to allow the exercises to resume.

Way Forward

¶5. (C) The Office of Military Cooperation-Kuwait and US ARCENT delivered a letter to COS LTG Al-Amir providing assurances that no DU rounds have been fired since 2003 and that meetings are underway between relevant US military officials and KAFWMDD to discuss the results of the survey and develop a plan for further cleanup. It also notes the MinDef's concurrence that live-fire weapons training will resume immediately.

Comment:

¶6. (S) The mystery of the unexpectedly high uranium oxide levels at the range will be solved in due course; a joint US-GOK team will survey Range 8 on March 3 and meet again on March 4 to determine the next steps. Of more immediate concern is the COS's arbitrary order to cease firing exercises at the ranges, a knee-jerk reaction to the results

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of the survey. The COS -- allowed full operational control of the Kuwaiti military by the MinDef -- has on occasion been critical of the United States, even to the point of disapproving valid requests by his officers to go to the US for training and conferences. The MinDef, who is also Deputy Prime Minister and a member of the ruling family, is favorably-inclined towards the US but generally allows the COS free rein when it comes to the mil-mil relationship. In this instance, the MinDef appeared chagrined to have been misinformed by his COS, whose training decision he overturned. However, we will have to manage the relationship with the COS carefully as we contemplate shifting demands related to the redeployment of forces and equipment from Iraq to Afghanistan. End comment.

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